



# Adam Smith, Philosopher and Man of the World

Andreas Ortmann, Benoît Walraevens

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## ADAM SMITH, PHILOSOPHER AND MAN OF THE WORLD

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A review essay on GAVIN KENNEDY, *Adam Smith: A Moral Philosopher and His Political Economy*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. xii+224; NICHOLAS PHILLIPSON, *Adam Smith, An Enlightened Life*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2010, pp. xiv+368.

THESE two books are quite different. One of us has previously reviewed Kennedy's earlier book on Adam Smith and has done so favorably (Ortmann 2007). Providing a minimum set of biographical details, Kennedy's new book is explicitly an attempt of sense-making of what Smith actually wrote. The basic message of this sense-making exercise is that Smith is not to be interpreted as the father of *laissez-faire* economics, and as the inspiration of modern model builders, but as someone who was trained broadly, read broadly and ferociously, and wrote broadly and deeply: «Smith attempted to root his theories on the mixture of human motivations within their historical and contemporary context, while modern economists built their models on the dominant simplicity of utility maximization and the single dimension of the 'granite of self-interest'» (Kennedy 2008, 262). That is a fairly silly view of what modern economics, and even today's model builders, are all about. A toast for experimental and/or behavioral economics anyone? A toast for theories of social preferences anyone?

A previous reviewer of Kennedy's book (Aspromourgos 2009), who also took issues with some of Kennedy's interpretation of Smith's economic theories (especially as discussed in chs 6, and 8-10 of his book), has noted that Kennedy's book was published in the Great Thinkers in Economics series and – while trying to reflect on the protagonists and their work, against the backdrop of their times – was written in style designed to please, no less, professional economists, students, and interested lay people, and all of that with-

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in apparently tight page limits. Something has to give under these circumstances. Kennedy's latest book, in our reading, is unlikely to be of interest to Smith scholars.

Aspromourgos mentions that an economist colleague of his, with no professional interest in the history of the discipline, asked him to recommend

a single book that best provides a balanced, overall account of Smith's economics and wider thought. ...Skinner (1996) seemed to me the best work to fill that bill, even though it is not exactly a singular, unified monograph. ...It would be unfair to employ that book as a benchmark for Kennedy's: Skinner is couched at a much higher level of scholarship. But does the book under review meet that kind of purpose at a more accessible, introductory level? Much of the book is a reasonable and accessible account of the main themes and issues in the thoughts or texts of the great man. But the accounts of income distribution and prices, and of productive labor and growth, are very unsatisfactory.

(p. 396)

We agree. In contrast, Phillipson's book may well be the book that Aspromourgos's colleague was looking for. It does provide a balanced, overall account of Smith's economics and wider thought and traces its origins and evolution. It is a very fine read indeed.

# 1. PHILLIPSON'S INTELLECTUAL BIOGRAPHY OF SMITH

Says Phillipson, «I wanted to write about Smith's life and works in a way which would throw light on the development of an extraordinary mind and an extraordinarily approachable philosophy at a remarkable moment in the history of Scotland and of the Enlightenment.» (p. xiii). We are happy to confirm that this game plan panned out to quite some extent. It is indeed one of the appealing features of Phillipson's narrative that he manages to embed the man and his thinking, and the evolution of his thinking, in an unusually rich tapestry of which significant parts were not known to us although we have read each and every book on Adam Smith's life that is out there. Phillipson's previous studies (broadly of various aspects of the history, politics and culture of Scotland around that time) come in handy to contextualize Smith appropriately.

Phillipson refers to the standard sources – e.g., Stewart, Rae, Scott, Ross (the first edition), and the editors of the Glasgow/Liberty editions of Smith's *œuvre*, all of which are duly acknowledged, and – in succinct «Notes on Sources» in the «Notes and Sources» appendix – judged for their usefulness. It becomes quickly clear that Stewart is Phillipson's most trusted source, not only quantitatively.

But Phillipson goes significantly beyond (selective) reliance of standard sources. He connects, for example, the geography of key places that Smith lived in – at the beginning of the book shown through maps of Kirkcaldy, Glasgow, Edinburgh – with the political and social circumstances in which he lived, and then with the emergence of Smith ideas about our capacity for sociability. For example, he argues that it was most likely that young Adam crossed on his way to and from school the local market;

Smith would have grown used to watching what he famously called the 'higgling and bargaining of the market' that was to seem to him as natural a form of social intercourse as ordinary conversation and one of the forms of social exchange on which sociability and social exchange depended.

(p. 17)

Likewise, the Kirkcaldy Burgh School's headmaster and his novel curriculum are soundly embedded in the political and social winds of change that blew through Scotland in the middle of the 18th century and that gave young Adam plenty of food for thought. In fact Phillipson makes the case that it was at Kirkcaldy Burgh School where Smith became acquainted with classical Greek and Latin texts, ethical treatises and theater pieces, all of which had a lasting influence on his philosophical enquiries (pp. 20-22).

## 2. SMITH'S LIFE AS CONJECTURAL HISTORY

All of this, almost inevitably, requires conjectures and inferences and Phillipson is not shy about rationalizing that strategy. Says he, «biographers must be prepared to conjecture if they are to have any hope of providing a coherent account of their subjects' lives and the development of their thought and if they are to generate fresh thinking on important biographical matters.» (p. 296; see also his reflections on the art of biography on pp. 4-8 where he argues the relative lack of hard facts about significant stretches of Smith's life invites «first and foremost, an intellectual biography»: p. 6). The clever title of chapter 5 – «Smith's Edinburgh Lectures: a Conjectural History» – also makes Phillipson's *modus operandi* quite clear.

Adam Smith – so we have reason to conjecture – would have appreciated, and approved of, that *modus operandi* and its rationale. After all, from very early on – in his *History of Astronomy* – he saw sense-making as a driver of scientific progress and «conjectural history» was, according to Stewart (*EPS*, II 52-55), a methodological device Smith himself made repeatedly use of on such various topics as economics, linguistics and law. While such attempt at instilling meaning and causality in a narrative that reflects Smith's life might over-rationalize what really happened, we are happy to report that Phillipson acknowledges alternative interpretations and settles on the one that he sees as the most plausible. There seems little over-rationalization here. As a result, his conjectures are often persuasive and insightful and shed new light on the foundations of Smith's intellectual project. For example, he argues that Smith might have read Addison's *Spectator* at school (p. 20), a book in which London is depicted as a «commercial city» and a «theater of life» where people are constantly engaged in the exchange of goods, opinions and sentiments (p. 22).

The Oxford period (ch. 3), generally neglected by commentators, is here given more prominence in Smith's intellectual development. Phillipson urges us to reconsider the way French Literature (Racine and Marivaux in particular) might have shaped Smith's moral philosophy (pp. 62-63). Then he convincingly shows that Smith's first philosophical investigations devoted to

the origin and evolution of language and jurisprudence, which together became the basis for his entire system (p. 70), are attempts from him to become a «perfect Humean» (p. 71) in providing more systematic accounts of topics Hume had neglected. Last but not least, Phillipson provides the reader with a rare albeit salutary comparison of the two sets of students' notes on Smith's *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (pp. 171-176). He highlights Smith's effort in reconstructing his course during his last year at Glasgow University «so as to bring questions about the duties of government to the fore», as if he was already preparing the ground for *The Wealth of Nations* (pp. 172-173, 175).

The picture of Smith's character that emerges in Phillipson's thirteen chronologically ordered chapters is that of a precocious doted-on only child and adolescent who was brought up by a pious mother who he adored, who was extraordinarily deeply and widely read, who was inspired to a significant degree by Francis Hutcheson and David Hume, who wrote beautifully yet carefully (guided by his early thinking about Rhetoric and *Belle Lettres*), who early in his life lectured in rudimentary form about the big themes that he was to write about in his key published works, who spent thirteen years – during which he wrote his highly influential *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (*TMS*) and which he called «the happiest and most honourable period of my life» (p. 268) – as philosophy professor at Glasgow, who then resigned to accompany as a tutor a young Duke while traveling Europe (especially Paris), a journey that influenced his thinking, who – after a few months in London – spent a decade in Kirkcaldy to prepare what was for a long time perceived to be his *opus magnum*, *The Wealth of Nations*, and who then spent another decade as influential Commissioner of Customs while revising his published works and trying to make progress on others, who was well-connected – indeed «born into the middling ranks of Scottish society» (p. 8) – and socially savvy (in that he understood well what might be too offensive), and who throughout his life was noted for his extraordinary memory as well as his considerable absent-mindedness and social awkwardness (the latter being particularly contextual).

There is little new in the basic story line presented above, even though one might be surprised to learn that during his professorship in Glasgow Smith was a «cult figure» for students who could buy his portrait bust at local bookshops and a «guru» for merchants turned free traders by his influence (p. 136).

### 3. SMITH'S UNSOCIAL SOCIABILITY

What is new, and what to some extent leads to a revision of the caricature of Smith as a mere scholar, is evidence compiled by Phillipson that shows that Smith, not with-standing his well-documented and frequently mentioned absent-mindedness and social awkwardness, was very much a man of the world. That was reflected in his membership in multiple clubs as well as his being

a serious university librarian, acquiring stocks of classical literature, contemporary history, philosophy, law and, interestingly, commerce. ...By 1754 Smith had also gained a reputation for property management. ...By the late 1750s he was in charge

of the university's accounts and the university's dealings with the town council on property matters and the students' tax liability. ... By the late 1750s seniority and competence had established him as one of the most powerful and heavily worked members of the College. He was Quaestor from 1758 to 1760, Dean of the Faculty – twice – from 1760 to 1762 and Vice-Rector from 1762 to 1764. ... by the end of his professorial career he had also been drawn into the thick of the complicated and often acrimonious political life of the College.

(p. 131)

Similarly, Phillipson argues that Smith, after Townsend's death, was importantly involved in reviving the Buccleuch estates (see pp. 202-204), being quite possibly instrumental in devising an intriguing incentive-compatible scheme meant to encourage agricultural improvements (p. 204), and quite possibly guiding Buccleuch through treacherous financial waters when the Ayr Bank (of which Buccleuch was one of the founders and capital guarantors) crashed in 1772 and left the Buccleuch estates to remain seriously encumbered for seven decades (pp. 206-207). Plus, already when Smith came back from France in 1766, his advice was sought by top political figures.

He was able to move in political circles at a time when the future of Anglo-American relations, the role of the East India Company in the government of India and public finance and taxation were under discussion, all matters of importance to the *Wealth of Nations*.

(p. 201)

When he returned to London in 1773 – «In the spring of 1773 Smith decided to end his Kirkcaldy retreat and to finish the *Wealth of Nations* (WN) in the capital. He needed company and American news.» (p. 209) –, things were not any different: «The three years Smith spent in London ... were notably sociable...» (p. 210) It was, «[h]owever, the American question that appears to have absorbed most of his energies...» (p. 211).

Phillipson also provides considerable detail about the immense work load that Smith was burdened with when he became Commissioner of Customs (255-268). In fact, Phillipson argues that this appointment was «a misjudgement of historic proportions» (p. 209) on Buccleuch's part: «The Commissionership of Customs was certainly honourable and lucrative, but it proved to be time consuming and wearisome and was to leave Smith constantly bemoaning the lack of time for pursuing his many philosophical projects.» (p. 209). Needless to say that Phillipson provides evidence, persuasive to us, to back up his conjecture in the chapter, and he provides considerable evidence about how public a person he had become in chapter 13.

#### 4. SMITH: PHILOSOPHER AND VIRTUOUS AND WISE MAN

Smith was first and foremost a philosopher «whose trade it is, not to do anything, but to observe every thing» (WN, I.i.9). His ambition, we are told rightly at the beginning of the Phillipson's book, was to provide the world with a new science of man «based on the observation of human nature and human history» (2). It seems unlikely that Smith would have based his system of thought on man's natural propensity and pleasure to truck, barter and ex-



change goods, favors, sentiments, words and opinions if he had not actively observed and participated in the theater of social life. His understanding of man's sociability needed constant experiences. Moreover, as the title of Phillipson's book suggests, Smith spent an «Enlightened Life». He understood that knowledge and ideas were debated not only in academic circles but increasingly outside the universities. The Enlightenment is defined, among other things, by the development of an intense cultural life in private clubs and salons where the pleasures of conversation were cultivated by men of letters, lawyers, scientists, politicians and merchants. Edinburgh, where Smith launched his career as a philosopher by lecturing on rhetoric and jurisprudence, was a town in which intellectual circles and the university were interwoven (p. 79) and was renowned at that time as the Athens of the North (p. 85). In literary societies, philosophical clubs and private dinners at home Smith was able to nourish his thought with new ideas (he could hear Glasgow's powerful merchants discussing about commerce at the Political Economy Club (pp. 40, 129), consequently learning to identify their «interested sophistry» and «spirit of monopoly») and to present first drafts of his own (pp. 129, 248). He knew quite well that his reputation and fame as a philosopher depended on his participation in these new forms of intellectual life.

Nonetheless, it would be misleading to suggest that Smith was an active member of every important philosophical club in Edinburgh (pp. 257, 259), Glasgow (pp. 40, 128), Paris and London (p. 209) for instrumental reasons only. Smith also took pleasure in seeing and discussing with his students (pp. 168-169) and his friends. His behavior is that of the wise and virtuous man whose happiness cannot be realized in solitude. Contrary to Rousseau's nostalgic ideal of self sufficiency of the solitary walker who lives outside the world in contemplation (Hanley 2008, 150), Smith, along the lines of Hume (Schliesser 2003, 332), depicts a virtuous man adapted to the realities of modern, commercial societies, *i.e.*, someone enjoying the pleasures of social life in open and frank conversations (*TMS*, VII.iv.28) with his friends and peers.

Rousseau, Smith's main opponent in *TMS* (p. 147), saw civilization as a threat to human excellence. For Smith he was wrong and *TMS* was, among other things, an answer to the Genevan philosopher (p. 148). The friendship between men of virtue is described in *TMS*, as it is in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, as «the happiest, as well as the most secure and permanent of all» attachments (*TMS*, VI.ii.1.18). Smith loved being surrounded by his friends (p. 276) That's why even at the end of his life he was happy to revitalize Edinburgh's intellectual life (p. 255) by actively participating in the «Oyster Club», also called «Adam Smith's Club» (p. 259) and to perpetuate the custom of receiving people at home for weekly dinners (p. 269) because «a philosopher is good company to a philosopher only; the member of a club, to his own little knot of companions» (*TMS*, I.ii.2.6). For sure Smith did not forget to underline the great pleasure men take in philosophical enquiry (*HA*, III.3; Imitative Arts, II.20), especially the tranquility of mind it procures when the theater of nature is given coherence by connecting chains of the imagination linking together previously unexplained phenomena (*HA*, II.10,

iv.13), and he described his retreat from the world for preparing the *WN* in highly positive terms (p. 201). Yet he was never so happy, from his own admission, than when he was a revered, respected and 'cult' professor of moral philosophy at Glasgow University (p. 136) and a widely listened and influential member of the most promising intellectual circles of the town (pp. 128-129). Intellectual and social virtues beget their own rewards and bring happiness. Contemplation, sociability and friendship are complementary, not contradictory, components of a happy life in commercial societies. Smith's life was an incarnation of these principles. He was a man of the world and a man of his time.

##### 5. SMITH AND ASPERGER'S SYNDROME: A CONJECTURE MISSED

It remains an interesting puzzle why a person who was well known for this frequent absent-mindedness and social awkwardness was to become so public a person and man of the world. Vernon L. Smith, in his magnificent autobiography (Smith 2008, ch. 9, in particular 190), has suggested that Adam Smith might have been afflicted by Asperger's syndrome, a form of «high-functioning autism» that comes with symptoms that could be construed as absent-mindedness and might come across as social awkwardness. We feel that Phillipson missed some important conjectural history in this respect and would urge him to investigate this conjecture in a second edition (which, we have little doubt, will be forthcoming soon).

Overall, Phillipson's book is a very fine read indeed. Quite possibly it is the most insightful book yet on Smith's life and work. It is a must-read for Smith scholars.

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